DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 389 268 IR 017 471

TITLE	Public Television and Diverse Audiences: Snapshot of a Relationship. CPB Research Notes, No. 80.
INSTITUTION	Corporation for Public Broadcasting, Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE	Aug 95
NOTE	11p.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Asian Americans; Attitudes; *Audience Response; Blacks; Children; *Cultural Pluralism; Educational Television; Ethnic Groups; Hispanic Americans; *Minority Groups; National Surveys; *Programming (Broadcast); *Public Television; Spanish; *Television Viewing
IDENTIFIERS	Corporation for Public Broadcasting; Language Minorities

ABSTRACT

In May 1995 the Corporation for Public Broadcasting commissioned a national study into attitudes and perceptions about public television. The study was conducted by Yankelovich Partners under the Omnibus Survey and included Asian, Black, Hispanic, and White Americans. The results demonstrated that public television is a well-established and regularly viewed institution among the great majority of Americans. Awareness of public broadcasting was somewhat lower for Hispanics and viewing was lower among African-Americans, but among minorities overall, the programs most watched were those most watched by the country as a whole. Patterns of public television viewing paralleled those of television viewing overall. All viewers prized public television for its children's programming, its overall educational value, its freedom from violence, and its balanced and realistic portrayals of people from different races and ethnic backgrounds. Public television children's programs are evidently playing an important role in the households of racial and ethnic minorities. However, public broadcasters will have difficulty in serving more Hispanic viewers unless the issue of language is addressed. (Contains 16 unnumbered tables.) (SLD)

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Research Notes

No. 80, August 1995

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Public Television and Diverse Audiences: Snapshot of a Relationship

In May 1995, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting commissioned national research into attitudes and perceptions toward public television. The study was conducted by Yankelovich Partners under the Omnibus Survey, and included Asian-American, Black, Hispanic and White Americans.

The questions in the survey were designed to reveal viewing patterns among each of these groups; to reveal their attitudes about public television and its programming, and what kinds of programming they associate with public television; and to learn what kinds of programming they feel public television should be providing. The survey results are summarized in the text.

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Viewing Patterns

The first questions in the survey concerned people's awareness and viewing habits regarding public television. **The results demonstrate conclusively that public television is a well-established and regularly viewed institution among the great majority of all Americans.**

Are you aware of public television?

	Total	Asian	Black	Hispanic	White[1]
Yes	85.3%	87.3%	77.3%	83.3%	86.3%

Responses to this most basic of questions reveal an almost universally high awareness of public television among members of all ethnic groups, with a slight dip among Hispanics and a somewhat more pronounced drop among African-Americans.

This reduced awareness of public broadcasting, particularly among Black viewers, has long been a matter of concern for public broadcasters. In focus group research conducted over the years, Black participants who have been shown samples of public television programming covering topics of interest to the African-American community have

[1] In all of the tables the category "White" refers to White Non-Hispanic population.

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consistently indicated their interest in watching such programs "if only I had known about them."

Unfortunately, public television programming is rarely promoted except through on-air announcements on public television—the promotional equivalent of preaching to the choir. This is not because public broadcasters don't want to reach out to new audiences, but because promotion budgets are uniformly small; public broadcasters are more likely to devote their limited funds to creating and broadcasting programs rather than promoting them. When promotion funds are available, the focus is more likely to be on specific program promotion and not general awareness or tune-in promotion.

However, it is possible to draw a second conclusion — that public broadcasting has essentially reached its maximum practical awareness levels. This conclusion is suggested by the fact that the question "Are you aware of public television?" is so broad—and could include people who have only *heard* of public television —that anyone with any genuine interest in public television's programs would answer affirmatively.

This line of reasoning is supported by a reality that is frequently overlooked when examining issues relating to ethnic and racial groups: minority television viewers choose the programs they watch for *personal* and *individual* reasons, just like any other viewers. People who tune in *This Old House* do so for one reason regardless of their racial or ethnic heritage: they want to learn how to fix things.

This unsurprising but often overlooked fact is demonstrated every year in minority audience research results; the most popular programs among minority viewers usually include the programs that are most popular among all viewers. Long-time mainstays of public television almost always turn up in the lists of most-watched programs among minority viewers, as does public television's superb schedule of children's programs.

How many hours of public television have you viewed during the past week?

	Total	Asian	Black	Hispanic	White
More than 3 hrs.	41.6	34.2	51.2	44.5	41.0
1-3 hrs.	23.4	29.0	29.1	18.0	22.5
1 hr. or less	14.8	15.4	9.1	12.7	16.0

Note: this and all other questions in the survey were asked only of those people who responded affirmatively to the first question; that is, to people who were *aware of public broadcasting.*

Not surprisingly, responses to this question mirror general viewing patterns that have been observed in other viewership studies. African-Americans, for example, tend to view more television in general than other groups, while Asian-Americans tend to view less. Public television's viewership clearly fits this pattern.

Two more questions were asked regarding *why* people tune in to public television:

Do you watch public television for one particular *type* of program or for several different types of programs?

	Total	Asian	Black	Hispanic	White
One type	14.2	8.8	8.1	22.5	14.5
Several types	82.5	89.9	89.4	77.5	81.7

Do you watch public television for one particular *program* or for several different programs?

	Total	Asian	Black	Hispanic	White
One program	10.9	10.8	6.2	19.1	10.7
Several progs.	88.8	89.2	93.8	80.9	88.8

Over the years, some critics have suggested that public television's viewership among minorities is artificially inflated by the inclusion of a relatively small number of programs specifically "targeted" to minorities such as *Tony Brown's Journal*, the long-running weekly public affairs program that frequently covers topics of particular interest to the African-American community. Others point to the airing of special programming during months that focus on recognizing America's ethnic heritage —such as Black History Month, Asian-American Heritage Month and Hispanic Heritage Month —as a token effort that could have the effect of boosting viewership numbers.

However, the results shown above suggest that these criticisms are not warranted, and that **the overwhelming majority of public television viewers of all ethnic backgrounds tune in to watch a variety of different kinds of programs.**

The clear exception to this conclusion is the high percentage of Hispanic viewers who tune in for just one type of program. This may reflect language issues within Hispanic families; research has shown that even among Hispanics who speak English fluently, Spanish is often the preferred language at home. For such viewers, the choice to view any English-language programming, including that on public television, is more likely to be driven by a very specific programming interest.

What Viewers Associate with Public Broadcasting

The next line of questioning sought to establish the qualities and characteristics that people associate with public television as compared to other television networks, and more specifically the types of programming people expect to find on public TV. **The results show that *all* viewers prize public television for its children's programming; its overall educational value; its freedom from violence; and its balanced, realistic portrayals of people of different races and ethnic backgrounds.**

The first series of questions concern the qualities that people associate with programs on public television. Survey participants could answer that public television's performance was better than all other networks, better than most other networks, as good as other networks, worse than most other networks, worse than all other networks.

Here, these questions have been arranged in order, according to the percentage of all respondents who felt public television was performing better than other television networks. (In the survey, the questions were read in random order.)

Public television provides good programming for children.

	Total	Asian	Black	Hispanic	White
Better than other TV	77.8	75.5	79.3	72.8	78.2
Better than/as good as other TV	94.9	92.4	94.9	92.8	94.9

It is fitting that public television's celebrated children's programming, with its deliberately inclusive casts, non-stereotypical portrayals, and strongly educational values, is uniformly accorded the greatest respect by members of all ethnic and racial groups, with fully three of every four respondents ranking public television's children's programs as better than those available from other television networks (including cable networks).

This result confirms studies that have consistently shown high viewership of public television's children's programs by minority households, and bolsters arguments for the efforts currently underway within public television to strengthen children's programming in order to provide a full-fledged ready to learn service.

Public television provides programming from which I've learned something I didn't know before.

	Total	Asian	Black	Hispanic	White
Better than other TV	75.6	76.7	74.8	68.9	75.7
Better/as good as other TV	94.6	99.5	93.2	95.1	94.7

Public broadcasting's virtually uniform high marks as a source of informal learning echo the results of other research conducted by CPB.

In fact, *educational* is the single most often used one-word description of public television, by people of all ethnic and racial groups. For example, during focus group research one Asian-American viewer said, "It targets people who want to be mentally stimulated. You can't just sit down and watch it like sitcoms," and a Hispanic viewer described public television as "the choice of those who want to be informed."

Again, Hispanic viewers are somewhat less inclined to rate public television above other networks.

Public television provides programming that is free from violence.

	Total	Asian	Black	Hispanic	White
Better than other TV	74.8	72.4	76.0	60.9	75.9
Better/as good as other TV	92.1	100	90.0	89.9	92.9

The public's perception of public television as a safe haven from the violence and mayhem that is frequently noted in commercial television programming is clearly

recorded in the responses to this question; viewers rank public television ahead of other television programming by an overwhelming majority.

Reasons for the significantly lower percentage of Hispanic viewers that rate public TV's status as superior to other networks are not immediately clear.

Public television provides programming that the whole family can enjoy.

	Total	Asian	Black	Hispanic	White
Better than other TV	67.5	71.5	73.9	59.5	67.3
Better/as good as other TV	92.3	90.6	96.0	88.9	91.9

Responses to this question show slightly more variation among groups than those to other questions, with Whites somewhat less likely to rank public TV above other television networks as a source of family programming, and Hispanics significantly less likely. Language may again play a role in the depressed Hispanic response. Reasons for the slightly lower response among White viewers may relate to the word "enjoy;" White viewers are also slightly less likely to rank public TV as superior in providing programming that is "of interest to me" (see question below).

Public television portrays people of racial or ethnic backgrounds realistically and not as stereotypes.

	Total	Asian	Black	Hispanic	White
Better than other TV	65.6	74.2	69.1	58.5	64.6
Better/as good as other TV	91.2	92.0	92.5	86.3	91.1

Results of this question corroborate qualitative focus group research conducted in past years by CPB, in which members of ethnic and racial minorities have generally agreed that public television tries somewhat harder than other broadcast sources to provide balanced, realistic portrayals of minorities —and indeed to include portrayals of minority group members at all.

This issue has been raised repeatedly in focus groups by members of all ethnic minorities, who uniformly share the perception that there is very little representation of minorities on television, and that most of what there is involves stereotypical roles. It is a matter of enduring and serious concern to many people of color.

It is interesting that White viewers are less likely to credit public television as being superior to other television networks in representing people of ethnic and racial backgrounds than are African-American and Asian-American viewers, who presumably would be more sensitive to stereotyping.

The substantially lower percentage of Hispanic viewers who rank public television ahead of other broadcasters should be a matter of concern to public broadcasters. It reflects sentiments expressed in focus groups conducted by CPB, where a number of

Hispanics expressed the feeling that members of other ethnic minorities had "broken through" on mainstream television to a greater extent than Hispanics.

Public television provides programming of interest to me.

	Total	Asian	Black	Hispanic	White
Better than other TV	56.7	59.4	67.9	63.4	54.2
Better/as good as other TV	87.3	88.5	96.1	84.9	86.4

The results for this question further dispute (albeit in a rather backhanded way) the notion that public television is a service primarily enjoyed by the White middle class; in fact, White viewers are less likely to agree that public television is better than other networks in providing programming of interest to me!

The results for this question are most usefully viewed in the context of the second question, above: that "public television provides programming from which I've learned something I didn't know before" —a proposition that brought overwhelming agreement.

For many viewers, this educational quality is a positive attribute. However, for others these same qualities are viewed in negative terms. In focus groups conducted by CPB, for example, several participants noted that public television's programming placed more demands on viewers than typical entertainment television, and some times could be too demanding. When viewers turn to television to relax, public television's more challenging fare may not be what they want to see.

Public television programs help me to understand more about people with racial or ethnic backgrounds other than my own.

	Total	Asian	Black	Hispanic	White
Better than other TV	55.8	63.9	66.5	54.6	54.4
Better/as good as other TV	90.6	98.7	93.7	86.6	90.1

The notion that public broadcasting can and should provide programming that helps America's different ethnic and racial groups bridge their differences and better understand each other has been expressed many times. Most public broadcasters would argue that this idea has found its way explicitly into scores of programs and series that have been produced and aired, and forms part of the underlying assumptions implicit in many other programs (for example, in the multiracial, multi-ethnic casts of children's programs).

In this context, the relatively low response for this question is disappointing. However, this low response may also simply reflect the difficulties inherent in creating programs that effectively and entertainingly close the gaps between people of different backgrounds.

Reasons for the two distinct layers in the response to this question (with Asian-Americans and Blacks more likely to give public TV higher marks, and Hispanic and White viewers less likely) are strictly conjectural, although the response of Hispanic

viewers generally reflects a pattern that seems to indicate a feeling that public broadcasting is not serving the Hispanic community as well as it could be.

The final question in this section of the survey asked viewers what specific kinds of programs they associate with public television. Multiple responses from the list below were allowed, and the percentage of respondents for each type of program is shown in parentheses.

Which of the following types of television programming come to mind when you think of public television?

Programming that is different from most other networks (different)
Historical documentaries
Children's programs
Drama
Nature and Science Programs
News and/or business information
Musical performances
How-to programs, such as cooking or home renovation

	Total	Asian	Black	Hispanic	White
1st choice	Different (46.7)	Children's (49.8)	Children's (54.5)	Children's (53.8)	Different (46.5)
2nd choice	Children's (43.5)	Different (45.6)	Different (41.4)	Different (51.7)	Nat./Sci. (43.4)
3rd choice	Nat./Sci. (41.4)	Hist. Doc. (44.1)	News (40.2)	Nat./Sci. (39.0)	Hist. Doc. (42.4)
4th choice	Hist. Doc. (41.4)	Nat./Sci. (39.3)	Hist. Doc. (38.8)	Hist. Doc. (37.0)	Children's (41.2)
5th choice	How-to (33.9)	Music (38.6)	Music (35.9)	News (33.5)	How-to (35.2)
6th choice	Music (33.7)	How-to (33.0)	Nat./Sci. (30.5)	Drama (30.0)	Music (33.2)
7th choice	News (28.0)	Drama (29.7)	How-to (25.8)	How-to (26.5)	News (25.7)
8th choice	Drama (26.0)	News (28.8)	Drama (22.9)	Music (26.0)	Drama (25.2)

Two features of this chart are of particular interest. **First, the exceptionally strong association between public television and children's programs among Asian-Americans, African-Americans and Hispanics reinforces the important role these programs are playing in America's households, especially those of racial and ethnic minorities.** These results tend to validate the choices public broadcasters have made in providing strong support for educational children's programs, and suggest that their absence could disproportionately impact minority families.

Second, the strong identification among all groups of public broadcasting as a source of programming that is different from other networks argues strongly against the idea that public television has been "replaced" by cable channels. This argument

is sometimes advanced to support the ideathat public television is an idea whose time has passed, and that public broadcasting's mission of providing a source of programming free of the constraints imposd by commercial pressures has been rendered moot by the proliferation of choices on cabe.

That argument is clearly contradicted by the results of this survey, which show that overall public broadcasting is still most recognized for the different types of programming it produces and broadcasts. Coupled with the results of the other questions in the section —demonstrating the high regard in which the majority of viewers hold public broadcasting on important issues regarding television —**these results comprise a powerful argument for the continued existence of public broadcasting as a unique and valued source of unduplicated programming.**

What Viewers Want From Pıblic Television

The final series of questions concerned the ypes of programs that viewers felt public television should focus on for the future. **These questions reveal a greater diversity in opinion among different groups, but alsoshow a clear emphasis on serving children of all ages.**

For each type of programming, survey participants could strongly agree that public television should provide more, moderatelyagree, neither agree nor disagree, moderately disagree, or strongly disagree.

Here, these questions have been arranged i order according to the percentage of all respondents who agreed that public televison should be providing more. (In the survey, the questions were read in random order.)

Public television should be providing mce programming for children beyond preschool age.

	Total	Asin	Black	Hispanic	White
Strongly Agree	52.9	53.)	64.2	54.5	50.9
Total Agree	89.7	92.3	92.9	91.4	89.1

In keeping with the recognition and importnce placed on children's programming throughout this survey, every group excep African-Americans (see next category) agreed that programming for children beyond prechool age constitutes public television's greatest priority; among African-Americans it ranked a close second.

Clearly, public television's focus on providing quality educational programming for children has found a supportive and apprciative audience among all Americans.

Public television should be providing more instructional television programming such as college courses, or courses that improve job-related skills.

	Total	Asian	Black	Hispanic	White
Strongly Agree	41.5	39.4	67.9	49.0	37.2
Total Agree	83.5	84.2	97.7	83.6	81.3

This importance accorded this category of programming may come as a surprise to some, but seems a logical extension of both public broadcasting's commitment to help educate America's children and its identification as a source of programming that helps people learn new things. Particularly noteworthy is the enormous interest in this type of programming among Black viewers.

In fact, through the years public television has been both a producer, broadcaster and distributor of a significant number of college-level telecourses in a wide variety of subjects; many of these courses still air with regularity on public television stations.

Public television should be providing more programs about racial or ethnic groups, such as documentaries about cultural heritage.

	Total	Asian	Black	Hispanic	White
Strongly Agree	31.6	40.9	54.4	48.5	25.7
Total Agree	72.9	87.8	87.6	84.6	68.7

The results for this question show the greatest discrepancy of any responses between White viewers on the one hand and ethnic and racial minority viewers on the other. It would seem that ethnic Americans are significantly more interested in learning about the cultural heritage and backgrounds of other Americans (or perhaps of their own group) than Whites are.

This interest has also been reflected in focus group research conducted by the Corporation, in which members of ethnic and racial minorities have indicated their interest in such programs for two primary reasons: first, to educate other Americans about the history, achievements, and challenges of minority groups; and second, to help members of the minority better understand their own culture and heritage.

One Asian-American viewer expressed the goal quite succinctly: "[Public television should do more] for general information about nationalities and cultures, because America stems from a lot of different cultures."

Public television should be providing more news and information.

	Total	Asian	Black	Hispanic	White
Strongly Agree	28.4	46.3	39.3	30.5	25.7
Total Agree	68.3	78.1	73.6	78.8	65.6

The most interesting aspect of the response to this question is the relative lack of interest among White viewers in receiving more news and information from public television.

The Results In Context

Perhaps the single most salient result of this survey is the high degree of agreement among viewers of different ethnic and racial groups. **There are few dramatic differences in the perceptions of public broadcasting that can clearly be ascribed to race or ethnic background.**

The single greatest exception to this general result is to be found in the perceptions of Hispanic viewers; as noted earlier, public broadcasting appears to be serving Hispanics less well than other ethnic and racial groups. By themselves, the results of this survey do not suggest why this might be so; however, when combined with other research conducted and sponsored by the Corporation, the most likely conclusion is that the issue of language plays a significant role.

General research in the Hispanic community suggests that even for those who are fluent in English, Spanish often remains the language of choice at home. Moreover, as America's Hispanic communities grow through immigration, the number of people for whom Spanish is the native language is growing rather than falling, both in absolute numbers and as a proportion of the Hispanic population.

All of this suggests that public broadcasters will have difficulty effectively serving more Hispanic viewers unless the issue of language can be addressed. In recent years, public broadcasters have experimented with a number of different approaches. Trials were made using the Second Audio Program of the television signal to provide Spanish-language audio. Unfortunately, most older televisions are not equipped to take advantage of the SAP; moreover, an extensive study of the feasibility of this effort on a system-wide basis concluded that the costs were prohibitively high.

Issues of language also affect Asian-American viewers, particularly recent immigrants. If anything, however, solutions to the language issues of Asian-American viewers are even more remote, as several different languages are involved.

If you have questions about these data, please refer them to Janice Jones, (202) 879-9677, fax (202) 783-1019, or e-mail jjones@cpb.org. We also welcome any comments and recommendations about how to make the data more useful to you.